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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 004217

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PINR ASEC PHUM TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: GOOD POLICY POORLY IMPLEMENTED

REF: A. BANGKOK 04168 (LEADING ACADEMIC EXPERT SEES SOME

IMPROVEMENT)  
1B. BANGKOK 04201 (SIGNS OF SOUTHERN HUMAN RIGHTS  
IMPROVEMENTS)  
1C. BANGKOK 03813 (SECURITY FORCES MOVING FORWARD AS  
SECTARIAN TENSIONS SIMMER)  
1D. BANGKOK 01675 (THE RISING USE OF PARAMILITARY  
AND NON-TRADITIONAL FORCES)  
1E. BANGKOK 01572 (SECTARIAN PASSIONS RISING)

Classified By: Charge' d'Affairs A.I James F. Entwistle. Reason 1.4 (b,  
d)

11. (C) Summary. A range of government and NGO contacts in Pattani and Yala expressed guarded optimism during late July poloff travel to the South that the recent arrest of suspected insurgents in that region had led to decreased violence. Several interlocutors criticized the sweeping nature of these raids. Two ethnic-Malay Muslims emphasized the lack of public trust in the government and the climate of fear inspired by the separatists. While a senior Army official emphasized the government's efforts to marry a reconciliatory "hearts and minds" approach with improved security, two teachers, one an ethnic-Malay Muslim and the other an ethnic-Thai Buddhist separately castigated the RTG for failing to effectively implement this policy. End Summary.

RETURN TO THE DEEP SOUTH

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12. (C) Poloffs traveled to the southern provinces of Pattani and Yala on July 25-26 to discuss the insurgency and related issues with local contacts. This was our first journey to these provinces in 2007; compared to the year before, there was a notable increase in manned checkpoints on major roads. Both Royal Thai Army (RTA) and police patrols appeared more visible and frequent in both provinces. Commercial traffic on major roads appeared unchanged and may have actually increased. Local markets and cafes seemed to be engaged in similar levels of business as last year. Downtown Pattani city appeared relatively unchanged, while the inner portions of Yala municipality seemed quieter than in previous visits. (Note: refs (A,B) detail our meeting with noted southern scholar Dr. Srisomphop Chiphromsi and update on the human rights climate in South. End Note).

¶ 13. (C) In a meeting at the RTA's Fourth Army Forward Command in Pattani, MAJ GEN Chamlong Bunsong said that the situation in the South is not better or worse, but more "stable." Chamlong, who serves as the Chief of Staff in the Region Four Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), emphasized that the Army remains firmly focused on PM Surayud's reconciliation policy and the need for a long-term approach to win the hearts and minds of the people. He admitted that local officials from all agencies must do a better job at providing support to the local community, but highlighted improving basic security as the key challenge facing the government. According to Chamlong, the recent surge of raids and arrests (ref A) were the result of better intelligence information from local sources. These operations were not a one-time push, but will continue for the foreseeable future.

¶ 14. (C) Chamlong said that the Army has a clearer understanding of who the insurgents are now. He said that while the insurgency does not fit under the command of a single separatist group, like the Patani United Liberation Organization (PULO), he believes that members of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Coordinate (BRN-C) have played a key role in conducting attacks. Chamlong explained that the label Runda Kumpalan Kecil (RKK)--often cited in local press reporting of insurgent arrests--was not a separate insurgent organization, but rather a label given to separatists involved in anti-government attacks, who had presumably received some training in Thailand (as opposed to training in other countries). Chamlong said that he believes that approximately 200 villages in the South have 5-6 insurgent fighters residing there, conducting and coordinating

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separatist operations.

¶ 15. (C) According to Chamlong, the goal of the insurgents remains the reduction of state control in the South, building popular support for separatism and the eventual intervention of international Muslim groups on the separatists' side. Chamlong noted that the RTG has been successful in denying this international support to the insurgents through regular, careful outreach to these organizations. He added that the insurgents remain unable to take and hold any piece of territory in the South. Chamlong denied any evidence of direct foreign involvement in the conflict, but noted that the trends of globalization and expanded access to information through the internet likely had an impact on the thinking of ethnic-Malay Muslims.

¶ 16. (C) Turning to recent raids that resulted in the arrest of over 300 suspects (Note: since this meeting several more raids have netted an additional surge of detainees. End Note.) Chamlong estimated that approximately 20 percent of those captured had been involved in direct attacks against security forces and civilians. The remaining 80 percent were associated with the separatist movement or had provided some type of support to the rebels. Chamlong tried to soften the picture of these arrests, suggesting that all 300 had merely been "invited" into custody, and admitted that only perhaps 10 percent of those captured would be turned over to the police and courts for prosecution. The remainder would be held for interrogation for up to 30 days under the Emergency Decree. An unspecified percentage of these detainees would then be "invited" to attend the Army-administered reeducation program, which includes vocational training. When asked what happens to detainees after their release, Chamlong said that local district and village officials "look after them."

¶ 17. (C) Chamlong strongly underlined the commitment of the Army to improve its image in the South and win hearts and minds. He denied allegations of abuse at any of the Army detention centers, and emphasized that Thai human rights NGOs had been allowed access to detainees there. Chamlong said

that international groups such as the Red Cross would not be granted access, however, because the insurgency remained a Thai internal manner. (Note: see ref B for more details on allegations of abuse. End Note).

¶8. (C) When asked about the role of the irregular Army Rangers (Tahaan Prahaan, ref D), Chamlong explained that the military tried to recruit locals to serve in this capacity, given their knowledge of the area, culture and people. Ranger units focused on building government support in specific villages and denying this territory to the insurgents.

BUT ARRESTS TOO BROAD

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¶9. (C) Dr. Tayudin Osman, (protect) the Vice Director of the Center for Muslim and Democratic Development, splits his time between his home village of Cho Airong and his wife's home in Si Sakhon, both in Narathiwat province (and both hotbeds of insurgent support). According to Tayudin, the situation is "better," with a decline in the number of deaths in recent weeks. Tayudin said that ambushes on security patrols had increased this year, as the separatists have switched the focus of their attacks from economic and civilian targets to the security forces. He believes that recent raids and arrests definitely had an impact on insurgent operations, and said that several operational leaders had been arrested. As a result of these arrests, the South, in his view, is "quieter."

¶10. (C) Tayudin echoed other contacts' concern that recent security force operations resulting in the arrests of suspected insurgents were too broad, however. Army and police units would move into a specific area and block off all roads and trails into a village for up to three days, before slowly moving this security cordon into the village itself. While security forces had specific names of suspects that they sought to arrest, they also detained any people who were present but not registered residents of that village.

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Tayudin explained that he often stays at his wife's family's home in Si Sakhon, where he is not a registered resident, meaning that he should also be subject to arrest should the security forces conduct a similar operation in that village.

¶11. (C) In Tayudin's opinion, a major problem is that "people don't trust the government." He believes that this can be reversed, but it will take time. He said that the RTG needs to build support through economic, social projects and better communication. Punishing "bad" officials would be a major step in winning broader public support. When asked about attitudes towards the judicial system, Tayudin said that people used to trust the courts, but now, that level of trust has decreased. The local population has not seen the prosecution of either insurgents or much more importantly, corrupt officials. In Tayudin's view, most people don't support the militants, they fear them. The local population is scared to talk to strangers or share information with government. When asked about sectarian tensions, Tayudin said that before the violence began in 2004, the ethnic-Malay Muslim and ethnic-Thai Buddhist communities were very close. As an example, Tayudin explained that, in the past, ethnic-Malay Muslims and ethnic-Thai Buddhists would invite each other to family weddings and celebrations. Ethnic-Thai Buddhists would even make special efforts to provide food prepared in accordance with Muslim dietary rules. Now, however, relations are very tense, and Tayudin said that he could not imagine ethnic-Malay Muslims and ethnic-Thai Buddhists coming together in such a harmonious manner.

GOOD POLICY, POOR IMPLEMENTATION

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¶12. (C) Nidir Waba, Head of the Saiburi Islam Wittaya private

Islamic school, adviser to the PM and Chairman of the Pondok School Association lauded the Surayud government's reconciliation policy, albeit with one caveat. "The problem is not government policy, but the administration of that policy." Nevertheless, Nidir believes that the Surayud government's approach is a marked improvement from the policy under ousted-PM Thaksin. "Thaksin was a major problem." Nidir judged that Buddhist-Muslim relations are "ok," but in some areas, tensions between the two communities may be rising. Nidir estimated that 70 percent of ethnic Malay-Muslims in the three provinces provide some type of support to the separatists--often out of fear--or are sympathetic to the idea of separatism. Nidir emphasized that fear is a key motivation, however. Most ethnic-Malay Muslims are afraid that if they are seen as supporting the government, they will be killed. Nidir said that the government must counter this climate of fear by providing effective security in a manner that shows appropriate respect for local identity.

#### BUDDHIST FRUSTRATION

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¶13. (C) Prasit Meksuwan, (protect) member of the Yala Teachers' Association and a former member of the National Reconciliation Commission--an independent body which in 2006 issued policy recommendations for reducing violence in the South--was very critical of RTG efforts in the South. In a surprising echo of Nidir's words, the ethnic-Thai Buddhist Prasit said that the government "has a good policy, but poor implementation." According to Prasit, some elements of the government are improving their tactics, but the disunity on broader policy implementation remains a serious problem.

"Individual agencies and ministries have their own missions."

More specifically, Prasit alleged that police, military and civilian officials still fail to "speak with one voice" on southern policy. Even worse, police and civilian-led community development and economic efforts remain unfunded, while the relatively healthy military budget is sometimes "skimmed off" by senior defense officials. When asked if the re-establishment of the Southern Border Provinces Peace Building Command (SBPPBC)--a center designed to unify these efforts--has led to better coordination and information sharing, Prasit, who has several friends working in the Command, said it had not. "It is beyond the SBPPBC now...they cannot fix the South." Prasit said that the RTG's

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inability to significantly retard the violence in the South is not driven by the success of the militants, but by the failure of the state. He added that most people in the South do not agree with the separatist cause, particularly the use of violence in attaining it. The difference is, separatists have easy access to the local people in their villages, and, while the insurgent policy is "not good" it is effectively implemented.

¶14. (C) Prasit lamented the lack of reliable information on the conflict in the South. He said that the Thai media often censors bad news from the South. Prasit believes that the government bureaucracy is even worse in failing to transmit negative reports to senior leaders in Bangkok. He pointed to this lack of internal awareness as a major failing in the Thaksin government. Prasit believes that the Surayud administration has fallen prey to this dynamic as well.

¶15. (C) Echoing comments from other contacts (ref A,C), Prasit said that relations between ethnic-Malay Muslims and ethnic-Thai Buddhists are not good. Both groups fear each other, and that fear is turning into anger. Prasit said that the way of life in the South has changed dramatically. Frequent school closures due to security problems means that many children remain home all day. Prasit added that he had heard truly shocking statistics of the number of Buddhists who have fled the South (Note: an oft-rumored dynamic that has eluded our attempts to gather reliable statistics on.

Septel will detail newly available government numbers on this trend. End Note). According to Prasit, in 2004, the three southern provinces were home to approximately 320,000 ethnic-Thai Buddhists. As of 2007, Prasit said that number had fallen to only 90,000. Ethnic-Malay Muslims had fled as well, especially those with children. (Note: these numbers are far more dramatic than any others we have come across and need to be confirmed. End Note).

¶16. (C) Prasit does see some positive dynamics at work in the South. In his view, local cooperation with security officials is improving, leading to better intelligence and arrests. Many people in the ethnic-Malay Muslim community who once voiced skepticism over the existence of the insurgency now believe that it exists. People also are starting to believe that the worst violence is not conducted by government security forces, but by the separatists. This growing realization, in Prasit's view, is leading more and more people to "ignore" the militants and their demands for support.

¶17. (C) When asked about his experience on the NRC, Prasit was openly critical of the group's final report. Prasit agrees with the need to use peaceful needs in winning support from the broader population, but cited the lack of effective security operations as a major policy weakness. He said that NRC head and former PM Annand Panyarachun focused the NRC report on the poor performance and abuses by state officials as a major cause of the violence. In Prasit's opinion, however, the real problem in the South is the separatist movement and its campaign of violence.

COMMENT

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¶18. (C) The broad outlines of the Surayud government's southern policy appear to be well-regarded among almost all of our interlocutors. The lack of effective implementation of this policy and concurrent sustained improvements in security, however, remain the key hurdles to significant improvements in the situation on the ground. Army and police officials are moving to address the security element of this equation, but it is not yet clear whether their emphasis on sweeping raids and arrests will result in more than a temporary lull in the violence. It is not yet clear whether the government has succeeded in disrupting the separatists' networks, or merely inspired the militants to lay low for a short time. Moreover, it is an open question whether the quieter atmosphere stemming from recent sweeps and arrests will outweigh the resulting negative impact on ethnic-Malay Muslim attitudes towards the state.

ENTWISTLE